

## Obituaries

# Norman Birnbaum, left-wing sociologist and journalist with the Nation, dies at 92

By [Harrison Smith](#)

January 6 at 7:38 PM

Norman Birnbaum, a left-wing sociologist and journalist who championed progressive causes on both sides of the Atlantic, helping establish the New Left Review in Britain and serving as a veteran member of the editorial board at the Nation, died Jan. 4 at a Washington hospital. He was 92.

Dr. Birnbaum suffered from heart problems and was recently diagnosed with sepsis, said his daughter Antonia Birnbaum, a philosophy professor at the University of Paris 8 in Saint-Denis, France.

A longtime professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, where he applied a socialist lens to the study of American society, Dr. Birnbaum [was credited](#) with introducing sociology to the undergraduate curriculums at the University of Oxford and Amherst College in the 1950s and '60s, a period in which he also helped lay the intellectual foundations of the New Left political movement.

By turns incisive and witty, he was part of a group of midcentury New York intellectuals centered around journals such as Commentary, Dissent and Partisan Review, which advanced a political position midway between Soviet-style communism and American liberalism. During a stint abroad, he also served as a founding member of the editorial board of the New Left Review, formed in London in 1960.

Dr. Birnbaum later joined the board of Partisan Review and married one of its editors, Edith Kurzweil. But he was best known for his long association [with the Nation](#), the esteemed weekly political magazine, where he served as an editorial board member for more than four decades and brought what Katrina vanden Heuvel, the magazine's publisher and editor, called "a radical voice and a voice of history."

"He knew socialist history as well as anyone and always maintained a progressive if not radical political stance, which informed the Nation," vanden Heuvel said in an interview.

In part as a result of graduate work in Germany and his years teaching in Britain, Dr. Birnbaum maintained a vast circle of friends and acquaintances that included German statesman [Willy Brandt](#), "liberal lion" Edward M. Kennedy, philosophers Isaiah Berlin and Iris Murdoch, and fellow journalists Irving Kristol and [Norman Podhoretz](#).

While the latter two became leaders of the neoconservative movement, Dr. Birnbaum remained a lifelong man of the left, a forthright critic of America's "imperialist" foreign policy who nonetheless cracked jokes and

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charmed his Republican political opponents at monthly meetings of the Committee for the Republic, a Washington public policy group in which he served as a board member.

Dr. Birnbaum also served on presidential campaigns for [Kennedy](#), Jimmy Carter and Jesse Jackson, was a consultant to the National Security Council under Carter (“any advice I had to give was systematically not followed,” he said) and advised the United Auto Workers and socialist political parties in Europe.

As a scholar, his books — including “The Crisis of Industrial Society” (1969), “The Radical Renewal” (1988) and “[After Progress](#)” (2001) — plotted the course of 20th-century intellectual history, tracing the rise and fall of social movements in the United States and across the West. While his calls for revolution in the 1960s went unheeded, he argued that the establishment of the modern welfare state was nonetheless a major achievement for the left. He also wrote frequently on religion (his doctoral thesis was on the Reformation), particularly the Catholic Church.

“A sociologist with extraordinary range, Birnbaum has sought to draw European traditions of critical thought into America, relentlessly tweaking the complacency that once, long ago, dominated the American scene,” economist [James K. Galbraith](#) wrote in Dissent magazine, reviewing Dr. Birnbaum’s 2017 memoir, “[From the Bronx to Oxford and Not Quite Back](#).”

Dr. Birnbaum, journalist and former Bill Clinton adviser Sidney Blumenthal once said, combined “the manner of an Oxford don, the method of a German social scientist and the passion of an Old Testament prophet.”

“I never believed in a social science made by and for academics, a dispassionate account of the world,” he told the reference work Contemporary Authors in the early 2000s. “I do believe that the present is history, but that we are not its prisoners. Only a God can make the world anew, but humans fail in their humanity if they do not try to make it better.”

Norman Birnbaum was born in Manhattan on July 21, 1926, and raised in the Bronx. His mother was a homemaker, and his father — the son of a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe — was a high school teacher who subscribed to the Nation and the New Republic.

Dr. Birnbaum’s interest in sociology took off around the time he graduated from high school, when he came across an article by sociologist C. Wright Mills. “It was an essay on the plight of the intellectuals,” Dr. Birnbaum later wrote. “I was 18 at the time and thought there was nothing better than becoming an intellectual.”

He graduated from Williams College in 1947, and at Harvard University he worked as a teaching assistant alongside Henry Kissinger, receiving a master’s degree in 1951 and a doctorate in 1958. Dr. Birnbaum was a professor at the London School of Economics, Oxford, the New School and Amherst before joining Georgetown in 1979, where he taught until retiring in 2001.

Dr. Birnbaum’s marriages to Nina Apel and to Kurzweil ended in divorce. Survivors include his companion, Terry Flood of Washington; a daughter from his first marriage, Antonia Birnbaum of Paris; and a grandson. He

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was predeceased by his daughter Anna Birnbaum.

Asked in 2007 why he spent his entire life on the political left, Dr. Birnbaum told the magazine Academe, “When I think of the characters and ideas of many of those on the right, the left seems to be the only place anybody with self-respect could be.”

It was also, he added, a natural fit for a first-generation American raised under the New Deal. “Gradually, there was the discovery that progressivism is at the center of a broad stream of American history,” Dr. Birnbaum said. “Being on the left was a way to join America, not to distance oneself from it.”


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#### Harrison Smith

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago. [Follow](#) 

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